<Book Reviews>Pamela D. McElwee. Forests Are Gold: Trees, People, and Environmental Rule in Vietnam. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016, xxvi+283pp.

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The result is an important work of scholarship that will appeal to a wide audience outside of scholars of Thailand and Southeast Asia, especially those interested in engaged anthropology, urbanism and development, heritage and conservation, civil rights, and grassroots movements.

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Forests Are Gold: Trees, People, and Environmental Rule in Vietnam

Pamela D. McElwee
Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016, xxvi+283pp.

Forests Are Gold: Trees, People, and Environmental Rule in Vietnam is made of gold, both the woody and the intellectual kind. Its title is drawn from a remark supposedly made by Ho Chi Minh in 1962 at the opening of North Vietnam's first national park (p. 3). The story is apocryphal, but the real source of this saying is rather revealing. At a 1963 meeting about the mountainous region, Ho gave a speech to 200 participants that focused on the climatic and agricultural impacts of forests and on the work of spreading socialism to the hinterlands. Tellingly, Ho valued forests not for their biodiversity but as a resource for a new society.

Pamela McElwee's book explores the imbricated projects of governing society and nature articulated in Ho's speech. She argues that "environmental policy is at times aimed not at nature, but at people, and failing to acknowledge this fact has resulted in numerous unintended, not to mention some intentional, consequences" (p. xiii). She urges her readers to be cognizant of both the social and environmental effects of what she terms environmental practices. In her analysis, McElwee develops the concept of environmental rule "whereby states, organizations, and individuals use environmental explanations to justify policy interventions in other social areas, such as populations, markets, settlements, or cultural identities" (p. xiii). McElwee's careful reading of the history of Vietnam's forests calls into question the standard explanations for their currently degraded state. The author shows that neither the Vietnam War nor Malthusian pressures, so often invoked as the explanation for environmental destruction in Vietnam, had as great an effect as the outcomes of various projects of environmental rule (p. 223). As McElwee reminds us, the Ke Go Nature Reserve was created in 1996 "out of the ashes of over-logged former timber

reserves" (pp. xiv, 73).

McElwee draws from recent work in the field of Science and Technology Studies and one of its formations, Actor-Network Theory. She views the latter as "less a full-fledged theory and more a series of observations" that illuminate the ways that knowledge circulates and how subjects and objects are coproduced during these circulations (p. 23). Such a perspective can be usefully combined with theories of governmentality (generated by the work of Michel Foucault) to analyze environmental practices. McElwee argues that environmental rule occurs through four steps that can take place in various combinations and orders: problematization, knowledge making, directing conduct, and subject making (pp. 12–22). These four processes provide a structure, either implicitly or explicitly, for each chapter.

McElwee's "historical-ethnographic approach" provides a rich source base, and the author draws on nuggets of information from almost two decades of research around the world. Often social scientists pay lip service to history but spend little time in the archives. McElwee not only exhibits a lively historical imagination but also shows specific continuities and discontinuities during the different periods in Vietnam's twentieth-century history. An anthropologist and environmental scientist by training, she along with her research team also performed household surveys and over 100 interviews that give, especially for the post-1975 era, an on-the-ground sense of why environmental rule has played out the way it has. Readers of *Southeast Asian Studies* will appreciate the applicability of McElwee's analyses to other Southeast Asian societies with environments—i.e., all of them. Although a more extensive examination of "ethnic minorities" and people living on Lao, Cambodian, and Chinese borders would have tied her book directly to other peoples in the region, McElwee engages in broad narratives of interest to Southeast Asian scholars.

Forests is divided into five chapters with an Introduction and Conclusion covering the long twentieth century, from the late-nineteenth century to the present. The first chapter provides a useful overview, one of the few written in English, of the history of forests in French Indochina. The practice and theory of French forestry in its empire mirrored those of other colonial empires but also diverged because of the ecological conditions of French Indochina. The "problem" from the perspective of French foresters and the colonial government was that, unlike hardwood forests elsewhere, Indochina's forests did not contain a high concentration of "economically valuable" trees. There was a lot of growth, but not of the kind that the French could profit from (p. 41). Furthermore, timely floods in Hanoi bolstered the case of those who argued that forests provided protection against such floods. While such arguments were made by analogy with Alpine forests and had very few studies to support them, they carried weight with colonial administrators and allowed foresters to expand their reach and exercise control over people living in the highlands. McElwee also ties the effects of forest regulation to anticolonial activity of the 1930s, showing how the Nghe Tinh rebellion in 1930 arose not just from food security concerns and Indochinese Communist Party organizing but also access to forests (pp. 57–58).

The second chapter focuses on environmental rule at the beginning of the socialist era during which the state management of forests increased. By the late 1950s initial efforts at organization through local boards had largely failed, so the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) government shifted its attention to State Forest Enterprises (SFE). The DRV faced the same ecological conditions (and challenges from the perspective of industrialization) that the French had faced. Following the logic of environmental rule, SFE sought both to increase production of wood and to create new socialist subjectivities. Similarly, the resettlement and sedentarization program (FCSP, Dinh Canh Dinh Cu) sought to manage both human and non-human nature, though it proved much less successful at transforming environments and forming citizens than the SFEs (p. 85). It was more successful after 1975, when the North took control of the South and priorities shifted to destroying longhouses and moving people into individual family units to break potentially unruly allegiances and redirect them toward the state (pp. 88–89).

The next three chapters focus on more contemporary issues. Chapter 3 examines the emergence of two forest subjectivities: state forest rangers and "illegal loggers." On the one hand, the forest rangers were defined as heroic for their efforts to protect a communal good. In practice their effects were more ambiguous, and they found themselves focused as much on enforcing state control and making a living as on protecting forests. On the other hand, although illegal loggers, hidden agriculturalists, and other forces outside of state control were blamed for deforestation, it was the development of cash crops, such as coffee and shrimp farms, encouraged by state policy that contributed to much deforestation (p. 108). Later, state officials learned to speak the environmental language of donor aid while pursuing other priorities, such as maintaining local employment or lining state and personal pockets.

In Chapter 4 McElwee turns to reforestation projects, revealing why colonial, socialist, and neoliberal efforts have all failed in their stated goal of creating forests. Although the "bare hills" that needed reforestation "became a political, not an ecological category" (p. 149), the biology of the exotic plants worked to reshape human subjectivities and tree species clearly emerged as "important actors in this story in their own right" (p. 136). These trees could not grow themselves and required large labor inputs of hand weeding and the application of fertilizers. Species such as eucalyptus also had high water demands, and farmers complained of dried-up streams and desiccated soils. The regeneration of forests affected human gender relationships as women collected non-timber forest products on nearby bare hills and men went farther afield to cut down trees. Finally, reforestation made land grabs by the rich seem less selfish and harder to protest on moral grounds as newly planted trees supposedly benefited the whole nation.

Chapter 5 examines the paradoxical effects of payments for ecosystem services and "Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation" (REDD+) that Vietnamese officials implemented after turning to markets to find cheaper solutions to environmental protection. Ironically, this move to markets has often strengthened the hand of experts and state actors. Rubber plantation

managers, too, have cynically claimed that replacing reforesting areas and watershed forests with rubber trees should be viewed as merely replacing one type of carbon with another. Indeed, McElwee claims that there is "some evidence that the ontological uncertainties about what constitutes a forest or a tree that have arisen in the context of discussions about REDD+ may be contributing to forest conversion and deforestation . . ." (p. 199). The question of what counts as a forest is one that runs throughout McElwee's book.

McElwee asks in her Conclusion, "is environmental rule a deliberate pretext to hide social goals under environmental practices, or is it more diffuse and less directed?" (pp. 213–214). While she views her project as one of unmasking the real social intent behind practices aimed at protecting nature, the book particularly succeeds in drawing attention to the unwanted social consequences of such projects. It helps us to understand better the effects of environmental rule and to plan more properly such interventions. Even though the author speculates that environmental rule is weakening in Vietnam, her book demonstrates that almost any human intervention into non-human nature will create winners and losers in society.

Given McElwee's experience advising on forest policy, she could have done more to sketch out what successful interventions might look like. She could have also written more about the agency of actual trees as, surprisingly, readers are mostly shown only the forests and not individual species. But now I am asking for an act of alchemy—the gold that McElwee provides is more than enough.

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The Oil Palm Complex: Smallholders, Agribusiness and the State in Indonesia and Malaysia

Rob Cramb and John F. McCarthy, eds.
Singapore: NUS Press, 2016, xvi+470pp.

The Oil Palm Complex: Smallholders, Agribusiness and the State in Indonesia and Malaysia consists of 14 chapters written by 16 contributors. Each chapter has its own topic and independent conclusion, especially Chapters 3 to 13. And the final chapter (Chapter 14) provides a conclusion based on the key findings of each chapter. Therefore, I will summarize each chapter and then discuss Chapter 14.

Chapters 1 and 2 provide a framework for the following chapters, including a systematic overview of the ways in which land, labor, and capital have been mobilized and combined in different modes of production. In Chapter 1 Rob Cramb and John F. McCarthy explain the aim of the